

Lee, Robert E.

Robert E. Lee, the brilliant commander of Confederate forces during the U.S. CIVIL WAR, was one of the most famous and respected soldiers in American history. After the defeat of the South, he served as a symbol of courage in defeat, embodying the finest elements of the Southern heritage.

Early Life and Career

Robert Edward Lee was born on Jan. 19, 1807, at his family's home, "Stratford," in Westmoreland County, Va. His father, Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee (see LEE family), had been a cavalry officer during the American Revolution and a close friend of George Washington. Henry Lee, a compulsive gambler, lost much of the family wealth in land speculation prior to his death in 1818. Robert grew up in genteel poverty in Alexandria, Va. Appointed to West Point in 1825, he graduated (1829) after compiling an enviable academic record. In 1831, Lee married Mary Ann Randolph Custis, great-granddaughter of Martha Washington by her first marriage. During the next 30 years he often lived at Arlington, the Custis mansion near Washington, D.C.

Commissioned in the Corps of Engineers in 1829, Lee held a variety of assignments, helping with construction work at several military posts and with river and harbor improvements at Saint Louis. Promotion was slow, however, and it was not until 1838 that he was made a captain. In the Mexican War, Lee was an engineering officer with Winfield SCOTT's force that fought its way to Mexico City. Lee's work at the battles of Cerro Gordo, Churubusco, and Chapultepec was outstanding and won for him praise and a brilliant reputation. From 1852 to 1855 he was superintendent at West Point. In 1855 he was made lieutenant colonel of the Second Cavalry, and in 1859 he commanded the force that suppressed the John BROWN raid on Harpers Ferry.

Role in Civil War

A moderate, Lee was dismayed by the extremists on both sides of the North-South controversy in the 1850s. Nevertheless, believing that he owed his first loyalty to his own state, he declined an offer to command the Federal army, resigned his commission in the U.S. Army, and offered his services to Virginia when it seceded in April 1861. Virginia was soon part of the Confederacy, and Confederate president Jefferson DAVIS appointed Lee a general in the Southern army. After an unsuccessful effort to repel an invasion of western Virginia, Lee was sent to prepare Atlantic coastal defenses. In March 1862 he returned to Virginia as an advisor to Davis. After Joseph E. JOHNSTON was wounded in May 1862 during the PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN, Lee became commander of the main Confederate army in Virginia—a force that he soon named the Army of Northern Virginia.

When Lee took command, the outlook appeared dim for the Confederacy. Federal troops were slowly gaining control of the Mississippi Valley, and a large enemy army was within sight of Richmond. In late June, Lee struck at the Unionists near Richmond and in the Seven Days' Battles drove them away from the capital. In August he defeated a Northern army in the second Battle of BULL RUN and chased it into the defenses of Washington, D.C. Lee followed up this victory by invading Maryland. During the Battle of ANTIETAM (Sept. 17, 1862) he fought a drawn battle with the Federals. Lee then withdrew to Virginia where he inflicted a costly defeat on his opponents at FREDERICKSBURG in December.

At CHANCELLORSVILLE (May 1863), Lee won his greatest victory and suffered his greatest loss. Boldly dividing his army into three parts, Lee assailed a larger Federal force. The result was a battle in which the Unionists were thoroughly befuddled and driven back with heavy casualties. Southern losses were also high, and among them was Lee's greatest lieutenant, Stonewall JACKSON, who died (May 10) of complications arising from wounds received a week earlier. Lee was unable to replace Jackson and never again achieved the degree of success he had won with the cooperation of Jackson.

In the summer of 1863, Lee launched another invasion of the North. In early July he attacked a Federal army at Gettysburg, Pa., and was defeated in the greatest battle of the war (see GETTYSBURG, BATTLE OF). The Confederates fell back into Virginia, and there, in 1864, Lee led them into a series of bloody battles against the Northern army, now commanded by Ulysses S. GRANT. Hampered by the loss of many good officers, such as James LONGSTREET (wounded May 6) and J.E.B. STUART (mortally wounded May 11), Lee maneuvered brilliantly against Grant and inflicted heavy losses on the Federals. Unable to seize the offensive, he was pushed back to Richmond and Petersburg and forced to defend those cities against a semisiege. Over the ensuing months, Lee's strength steadily declined, and Grant finally broke through the Southern lines in April 1865. Lee tried to escape with his army to join other Confederate forces in North Carolina, but Grant trapped him at APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE and forced him to surrender on Apr. 9. By then Lee had become the symbol of

the Confederacy (and he had finally been appointed general in chief of all Confederate armies in February); when he surrendered, other Southern armies soon ceased fighting.

Postwar Life and Reputation

After the war, Lee became president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Va. Accepting the results of the war, he devoted himself to education and to helping rebuild the South. Lee died on Oct. 12, 1870.

Lee had many weaknesses as a general. He was too considerate of others, and his politeness sometimes obscured the necessity for quick, total obedience to his orders. He entrusted too much discretion to subordinates who, except for Jackson, were not capable of handling it. He may not have paid sufficient attention to logistics, and he has been accused of devoting too much attention to Virginia to the neglect of other areas. Despite these weaknesses, many historians maintain that Lee was the most capable commander of the Civil War. A great general and a great man, Robert E. Lee was a fitting symbol of the South as well as an American hero.

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